

MEKONG CONNECTION

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CRACKING COCONUTS OPENING OPPORTUNITIES

How Group of Export Organic Fruit Product is fast tracking exports, productivity & innovation

What started as a modest 3-hectare farm has come a long way to positioning itself as a multi-awarded and certified coconut exporting business. Located in Bang Phae District, Group of Export Organic Fruit Product was established in 1993 by Prayoon Visuttipaisan, an agronomist with over 25 years of farming experience. Weathering the business finally paid off in 2011 when the Group received the highest national award for farming from the Thai government, consequently jumpstarting its success.

Leveraging on coconuts, one of Thailand's major fresh fruit exports, the Group engages in direct and indirect exports. "We supply coconuts to domestic dealers and factories who then export their products," explains Sira Paleewong who co-manages the Group with his uncle. "Similarly, we directly export our products to international markets such as China, Singapore, and some European countries. The diamond-shaped coconut is

among our top-sellers," he continues. With well-receptive markets, the Group has been focusing on the viability of expanding market access and integrating in regional and global value chains. This was demonstrated by prioritizing and strengthening their foundation for quality and safety standards.

Backed by previous certifications such as Thai GAP and USDA Organic certification, Group of Export Organic Fruit Product took a cue from the MI-JAIF Project to enhance trade competitiveness by further upgrading their production and processing standards. The Group, as an Action Plan (AP) for the regional training program on SME Cluster Development and Export Consortia Formation, applied for the Global GAP certification. Through the project support, the cluster group received the certification in March 2017. The Global GAP certification has helped the Group improve product quality and further integrate the product into regional and global value chains. Since

then, the Group has successfully exported to European markets including Germany, Spain, Cyprus, and the Netherlands, thereby increasing sales volume by 30% in the following year. The Group has also begun investing in a netted, closed-area packing house to obtain GMP and HACCP certifications this year.

Acquiring such certifications also had spillover effects on the productivity of contract farmers supplying the enterprise with coconuts. For instance, the Global GAP certification extends to a total of 20 coconut farmers who are trained in cultivation techniques. This provides an opportunity to upgrade the quality of their produce to be able to meet the enterprise's standards. In turn, regular procurement of coconuts give the farmers a source of stable income. In addition to this, the Group of Export Organic Fruit Product prides itself for its commitment to improving the community around them.

(continued on page 2)



Dr. Watcharas Leelawath
Executive Director

It was in 2016 when Mekong Institute officially adopted its new five-year Strategic Plan highlighting its commitment to three thematic areas that reflect both the needs and the future direction of the Greater Mekong Sub-region: agricultural development and commercialization, trade and investment facilitation, and innovation and technological connectivity. Undertaking the midterm review of the MI Strategic Plan 2016-2020 this year has yielded valuable lessons and insights

on MI's work along these thematic thrusts and most of all, our position in the region.

In the first two and a half years of implementation of the Strategic Plan, MI has undertaken activities that have reinforced its relevance and role as a human resource capacity development organization. Our training programs have diversified to reach out and engage more actors, and in turn, facilitate broader impacts and enable stronger sustainability.

Our work on the project on *Enhancing Competitiveness of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises in the Southern Economic Corridor of ASEAN Mekong Subregion*, which successfully concluded this year, has recorded big gains in terms of helping SMEs in the corridor to have a stronger chance of playing in the regional and global value chain. Our story in this issue on how a coconut exporting business successfully received their Global Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification with the support and guidance of the Project is just one example.

At the same time, this year we launched the second phase of MI's Food Safety Project. This second phase, now re-branded as PROSAFE (Promoting Safe Food for Everyone), intends to scale up regional and local capacity building initiatives on food safety and put in place an integrated mechanism that will bring about significant changes in the food safety perception and practices of the region. In addition to our in-house trainings, the Project has beefed up its on-the-ground activities, as evidenced, for instance, in the Cambodia Food Safety Week held this November. Featuring back-to-back activities that engaged a broad network of food safety champions in the country, such an event has also brought MI's presence closer to direct stakeholders while allowing more extensive discussions among multiple concerned actors to take place.

The review of the Strategic Plan reinforced that MI is on the right track in terms of our thematic priorities and focus. Despite the agriculture orientation of the region, we are also transitioning to an economy heavily oriented on industrial production amidst a wave of global breakthroughs in innovation and technology. Our three thematic areas are even more relevant than before.

At the same time, this is not a time for complacency. The challenge to ensure that our activities continue to remain effective and impactful remains. These are calls that we will continue to respond to in the months and years ahead.

(continued from page 1)

In 2014, the Group established its learning center commissioned by the government's One Tambon (meaning sub-district) One Product Project. The learning center offers trainings on improving coconut production and packing processes to farmers, government officials, teachers and students, and private sector representatives. "If you want to have a better living, come to learn and apply the techniques. The best we can offer is to educate others with what we, ourselves, have learned from years of experience – both failures and successes," says Paleewong.



Taking inevitable challenges into account, the Group continues to adapt to changing market demands and growing competition. Paleewong admits that other coconut-exporting countries such as Vietnam are nearly catching-up on the quality of fresh coconuts and hold advantage in terms of cheaper labor. One thing, though, that keeps them afloat is innovation. The Group of Export Organic Fruit Product has diversified its product line from fresh coconuts to include frozen coconut meat and bottled coconut water. Likewise, the Group has recently launched its website for digital marketing to increase borderless access and transactions. He shares: "We hope that in the next five years, our e-commerce platform will be an asset to how we conduct business."



With its current 198-hectare coconut farm, the Group of Export Organic Fruit Product strives to strengthen its export quality, social responsibility, and brand identity in delivering coconuts to over 20 countries in four continents (and hopefully, counting). ■



THINK FOOD SAFETY STANDARDS

Food safety champions and key stakeholders gathered for the Cambodia Food Safety Week on November 5-8, 2018 in Phnom Penh. A first of its kind, the week-long event featured discussions and activities aimed at promoting safe food consciousness in the country.

The highlight of the week was the Food Safety Forum held on November 6 at the Institute of Technology of Cambodia. Sessions examined the country's food safety standards and regulations and how it can enhance agri-food SME competitiveness and trade opportunities. During the opening ceremony, MI Executive Director Dr. Watcharas Leelawath underscored the importance of all stakeholders at different levels of the food supply chain: "Food safety is for everyone. Food safety is because of everyone." He continued: "The quality and competitiveness of Cambodia-made food products rely on the accountability of actors at each stage, including production, processing, distribution, and consumption."

Two localized trainings on *Cambodian Good Agricultural Practices (CamGAP)* and *Good Hygiene Practices (GHP) in Restaurants and Canteens* were simultaneously conducted on November 5-7 at Sunway Hotel and November 7 at Phnom Penh Hotel, respectively. According to Dr. Aing Hoksrun, chief of the Food Bureau at the Ministry of Health's Department of Drugs and Food, more than 2,000 eateries nationwide have been GHP-certified. This is, in part, due to the government's ongoing efforts to meet the growing demand for safe and quality food in the country.

Capping off the series of activities was the Knowledge Sharing Forum on *Food Safety Promotion in Cambodia*, which gathered MI-trained food safety champions. Discussions centered on the food safety situation in Cambodia, food management systems and food safety-related work of different ministries, as well as areas for future multi-sectoral collaboration. As echoed by the participants, when demand is paralleled with commitment and collective action, ensuring safe food for everyone is possible.

The Cambodia Food Safety was organized by Mekong Institute, in collaboration with the New Zealand Aid Programme, with the support of the following partners: Chemical Engineering and Food Technology Department, Institute of Technology of Cambodia; Faculty of Agro-Industry, Royal University of Agriculture; Plant Protection, Sanitary and Phyto-Sanitary, General Directorate of Agriculture, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries; Institute of Standards of Cambodia, Ministry of Industry and Handicraft; Cambodia Import-Export Inspection and Fraud Repression Directorate-General, Ministry of Commerce; Food Safety Bureau, Department of Drug and Food, Ministry of Health; and Lotus Radio.

TESTIMONIALS



Men Pisey
Quality Assurance Inspector,
Yinkok Food Corp.
*Training on Good Hygiene Practices
(GHP) in Restaurants and Canteens*

Good Hygiene Practices are very important to food handlers like us. It is good to constantly learn and apply practices that are in line with our company principles, especially in promoting quality and sanitation day-in and day-out. This is my first time to attend a training conducted by MI, and I was really impressed. I am looking forward to participating in more food safety trainings like this in the future.



Sou Ser Kiros
Admin & Finance Asst., Green Garden
SME Exhibition, *Food Safety Forum*

It is our privilege to have been invited as exhibitor during the Food Safety Week. It is a good opportunity to showcase our products and demonstrate how we, as an SME, put safety and quality first. Food safety in Cambodia still has a long way to go but it is through such events that people become aware of its importance.



Tuy Sokneng
Food Safety & Quality Assurance
Supervisor, Leang Leng Enterprise
*Knowledge Sharing Forum on
Food Safety Promotion in Cambodia*

I'd like to commend Mekong Institute for organizing the Cambodia Food Safety Week. The activities provided relevant information on food safety standards and practices. I highly appreciate the sessions, especially as a trainer, I can share my knowledge to other colleagues. It also gave us an opportunity to establish networks and connections with different ministries, academics, and SMEs.

CROSS-COUNTRY ACTIVITIES

- Workshop on *Promoting Logistics Alliance and Policy Development*
- National Workshops on *Green Freight and Logistics*
- National Workshops on *Rural E-commerce*

THAILAND

Trainings

- Rural E-commerce Development in Lancang-Mekong Countries
- Food Hygiene and Sanitation for Food Handlers
- Gender Equality and Women Empowerment: Sharing Good Practices and Experiences of Thailand
- Innovative Entrepreneurship: From Ideas to Starting a Business
- Postharvest Management System in Fresh Horticultural Produce

Workshops

- Regional Consultative Workshop on Improvement in Border Facilitation for Trade Logistics Development in Lancang-Mekong Subregion

Meetings, Forums and Other Activities

- Lancang-Mekong Business Forum 2018
- Forum on Korea's Role in Mekong Cooperation
- Seminar on Promoting Innovation and Technology as Driven Tools for Economic Sustainability in the GMS
- Inception meeting for project on Transboundary Cooperation Mechanism on Adaptation to Climate Change and Hydropower Development Projects
- Consultative Meeting on Cross Border Facilitation on Trade, Tourism, Transport and Logistics Development

P.R. CHINA

Trainings

- New Technologies Application for Power Grid Development

Meetings, Forums and Other Activities

- Consultative Meeting on Development of GMS Transport Information Connectivity System
- Monitoring of CBTA Early Harvest Implementation

MYANMAR

Trainings

- Cost-effective Crop Production

Meetings, Forums and Other Activities

- Meeting on Roll out of Business Linkage Model among Maize Value Chain Actors
- Meeting on Farmer Group Strengthening and Formation

CAMBODIA

Meetings, Forums and Other Activities

- Cambodia Food Safety Week

VIETNAM

Trainings

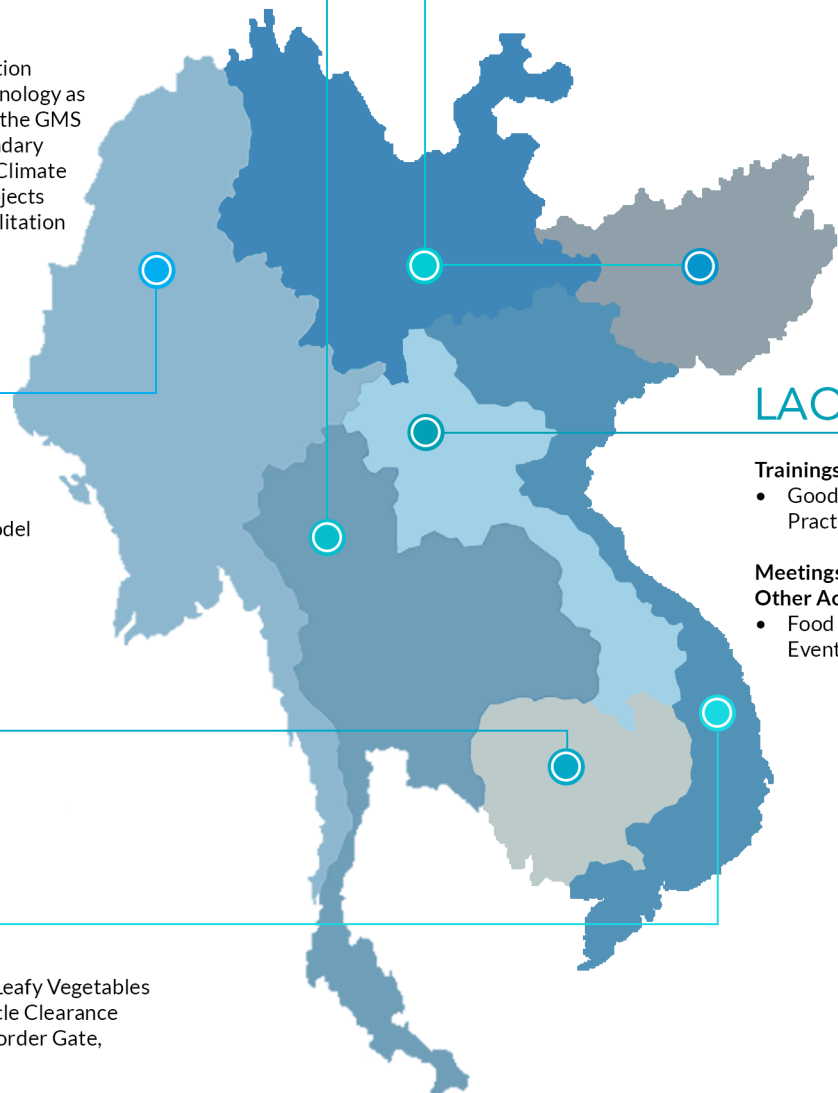
- Postharvest Safe Food Handling for Green Leafy Vegetables
- Process and Procedures of Goods and Vehicle Clearance and Immigration at Lao Bao International Border Gate, Quang Tri Province

Workshops

- Introduction of Software for Green Logistics Service Quality Standard
- Risk-based National Food Safety Control Systems

Meetings, Forums and Other Activities

- Discussion on Partnership Agreement on GMS Logistics Database Interchange
- Knowledge Sharing Forum on Food Safety Quality Management on Fruit and Vegetable Production in Mekong Delta Region



LAO PDR

Trainings

- Good Agricultural Practices Standards

Meetings, Forums and Other Activities

- Food Safety Learning Event and Networking

BUILDING CAPACITIES, STRENGTHENING REGIONAL TIES

Conversations with the Mekong Institute Young Scholars



Viengsavanh Keokounnavong
Information technology professional
Archives Section, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Lao PDR



Mya Thuzar Swe
Staff officer
Foreign Economic Relations Department,
Ministry of Planning and Finance, Myanmar



Chunyang Zao
Program officer
Yunnan Education Department,
Kunming University, P.R. China



Hoang Thi Minh Ha
Researcher
National Centre for Socio-economic
Information and Forecast, Ministry of
Planning and Investment, Vietnam



Touch Seng
PhD candidate
Department of Urban and Regional
Planning, Faculty of Architecture,
Khon Kaen University, Thailand

"The MIYS Program is different from other short-term programs at MI," explains Mrs. Mya Thuzar Swe, Mekong Institute Young Scholar (MIYS) from Myanmar. "It's designed as an 'on-the-job training program' so we have to work with an assigned MI department," she adds.

Indeed, the MIY Program is a distinct program on its own, quite unlike the usual training courses at Mekong Institute that run for a week or two. Yet, it is also no different from these training programs as far as overall goals are concerned: The program aspires to develop the capacities of the Mekong region's human resource while doubling as a way to intensify regional cooperation and ties. Supported by the Government of the People's Republic of China under the banner of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, the MIYS Program sets out to provide a structured learning opportunity in the form of a hands-on experience in regional development and cooperation work. In May this year, MI welcomed the first batch of MIYS --- five professionals from the government and the academe in Cambodia, P.R. China, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam.

This is not the first time that MI has offered such a learning program for regional nationals. In 2010, the Young GMS Professionals Program was launched with the support of the New Zealand Aid Programme (NZAP). This three-year program allowed young professionals from the six countries of the region to join a six-month learning program at MI where they engaged in training and research activities of the various program departments.

The launch of the MIYS Program this year reaffirms the Institute's position as a regional capacity building institution and its role as a hub for driving forward collaboration among the Mekong countries. Before beginning their postings as program officer at the MI departments, the MIYS first attended a two-week training on basic facilitation skills and regional

cooperation concepts to introduce them to the work of MI and the critical skills required.

Six months after joining the program, the MIYS come away with meaningful lessons and experiences. "This is a good program that gave me an opportunity to share knowledge and experiences, and also establish relationship with the other young scholars and with MI staff," shares Mr. Viengsavanh Keokounnavong, MIYS from Lao PDR. For Mr. Keokounnavong who works at the archives unit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the work he did for MI's E-library (under the Communications and Knowledge Department) gave him the idea to introduce a similar system at his workplace.

For Mr. Seng Touch from Cambodia and Ms. Hoang Thi Minh Ha from Vietnam, the MIYS Program afforded them an opportunity to learn from and experience working in an international organization. Getting placed at the departments at MI - Trade and Investment Facilitation (TIF) Department for Mr. Seng Touch and the RLED-EWEC Project for Ms. Hoang Thi Minh - also meant working in an area completely new to them.

"I worked on TIF's projects on e-commerce, and this is a completely new field to me since my background is regional and urban planning. But I learned new things such as data management, budget and donor approval process, and it made me realize that business is in fact an integral component of urban planning," describes Mr. Seng Touch.

"Working with EWEC meant everything was new to me, such as concepts on cross-border trade facilitation and the tripartite models. I had to read and research to understand these," Ms. Hoang Thi Minh explains. "But I learned how special the EWEC project is because it's a development initiative, and since my organization would like for us to widen the topics and sphere of our work in the future, I think

my experience working in the EWEC project will be very beneficial to me."

Mrs. Mya Thuzar Swe from Myanmar who worked with MI's Agricultural Development and Commercialization (ADC) Department, also narrates: "Part of my work with the ADC Department was preparing reports on the food safety situation in Myanmar, and I learned a lot about research in my six months working with the department, especially report-writing, collecting information, validating data and checking whether the information is useful. Taking part in the training programs of the department also taught me about the basics of food safety and connected me with experts from both Myanmar and other countries, and this made me more confident when I prepared later reports for the department."

The goal of institutional linkaging, a central point of the MIYS Program, has also manifested in not only increased connections between the young scholars' institutions but also between MI and their respective organizations. A clear example is a Memorandum of Understanding signed in November this year between MI and Kunming University, the organization of Mr. Chunyang Zhao, MIYS from P.R. China. "With the MoU between MI and Kunming University, I trust that we will have a good cooperation in the future. I hope MI can create opportunity for each person to come to Kunming, and learn more about my city and my university. This way the cooperation would further deepen in the future," he shares.

The MIYS Program offers a three-way platform for these junior and mid-level professionals, for MI and for the institutions in the regions. The learning of new skills, the exposure to regional development work and the linkaging and collaborations established among institutions can pave the way to stronger ties and better cooperation in the future. ■

MI Inks MoU with Thai MoNRE to Strengthen Collaborative Information Exchange on Water Resource Management and Climate Change Adaptation

MI signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Thailand Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment on October 11, 2018 for the project on *Transboundary Cooperation Mechanism on Adaptation to Climate Change and Hydropower Development Projects*. Supported by the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) Special Fund, the project aims to strengthen cooperation in the management of water storage structures and the mitigation and adaptation to climate change impacts in the Mekong River Basin.



Training on Procedures of Goods and Vehicle Clearance Seeks to Advance CBTF Efforts

The EWEC Project Vietnam Team, in cooperation with relevant agencies in Quang Tri province, hosted a training on the Process and Procedures of Goods and Vehicle Clearance and Immigration at Lao Bao International Border Gate last October 3, 2018. The training was part of ongoing efforts to advance cross-border facilitation in the East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC). More than 60 cross-border trading enterprises and relevant government representatives discussed the procedures for crossing the Lao Bao bordergate to reduce time and costs.



MI, Israel Join Hands to Beef Up Skills in Innovative Entrepreneurship

With the support of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and MASHAV-Israel's Agency for International Development Cooperation, MI organized a training program on Innovative Entrepreneurship: From Ideas to Starting a Business from October 29 to November 9, 2018 at MI. Twenty-one participants from government agencies and the private sector from the six countries in the region were introduced to innovative ways of generating viable ideas for a business, branding and financial management of a startup.



Lancang-Mekong Business Forum 2018 Promotes Networking and Exchange among SMEs

More than 100 SMEs from the processed food sector, business associations, as well as research institutions and government agencies, joined the Lancang-Mekong Business Forum 2018 on November 15-16, 2018 in Bangkok. The event, in collaboration with the Ministry of Commerce, Thailand and supported by the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Special Fund, aimed to provide a platform for business linkaging and knowledge exchange among SMEs in the Lancang-Mekong countries. The two-day event featured a seminar, business matching, product exhibitions and a structured learning visit.



MoUs with Kunming University and LoxSim Expand MI Partnerships

In November this year, MI signed a Memorandum of Understanding with two new partners, formalizing new cooperation commitments. On November 1, MI and Kunming University, P.R. China, formalized collaborations in research, exchange and training programs on agriculture, trade and entrepreneurship development. On November 27, MI signed another MoU with Loxley Simulation Technology Co., Ltd. (LoxSim) for cooperation in research and training of logistics and supply chain clusters, and the promotion of technology adoption among logistics operators and drivers.



MI Co-organizes Forum on Korea's Role in Mekong Cooperation

MI jointly hosted with the Embassy of the Republic of Korea (ROK) in Thailand the Forum on Korea's Role in Mekong Cooperation on November 29, 2018 in Bangkok, Thailand. Attended by over 60 delegates from government, international, nongovernmental institutions and the academe, the forum highlighted the cooperation efforts of ROK along its New Southern Policy. MI Executive Director Dr. Watcharas Leelawath was panel discussion moderator, while Mr. Madhurjya Kumar Dutta, Director of the Trade and Investment Facilitation Department talked about MI's role as fund manager of the Mekong-ROK Cooperation Fund.



MI Joins Silk Road Forum

The 4th Silk Road Forum was held in Paris, France on December 7-8, 2018. Gathering over 300 distinguished representatives of 90 various institutions from 35 countries, the forum covered key topics on open world economy, scientific and technological revolution, green and low-carbon development, and inclusive development. Dr. Watcharas Leelawath, MI Executive Director, discussed development cooperation and cultural exchange as drivers of economic growth and integration in the Mekong region.



MI E-library and GMS Statistics Database Launched

MI offers two new knowledge platforms designed to make information on the Greater Mekong Sub-region more accessible and available. The **GMS Statistics Database** provides national and international-generated statistics on the GMS countries' socio-economic indicators, while the **MI E-library** features a collection of both MI-produced and external digital resources on the GMS countries.



MI E-library



GMS Statistics Database



ALUMNI TESTIMONIALS

Ms. Nong Chanthyda

Assistant, University Industry Linkage Office, Institute of Technology of Cambodia
Activity: Innovative Entrepreneurship: From Ideas to Starting a Business

Cambodia is a developing country and we need to teach more about entrepreneurship. We have a business center in my institute, and I can transfer the knowledge I gained from this training to the students in my country. I would definitely like another opportunity to join another training here again. It's easy to adapt to the atmosphere at MI.



Dr. Aye Aye Than

Lecturer, Department of Soil and Water Science, Yezin Agricultural University, Myanmar
Activity: Raising Public Awareness on Safe Food Consumption

Before I came to this training, I did not have much knowledge about food safety, however after this training, I became very interested in the topic, and I came to understand more about how food safety is important not only for our health but also for the improvement of our country. What I like most about this training are the field trip and the lectures on the food safety practices in Thailand. Thailand is advanced in food safety in the region and we can follow their practices.



ALUMNI TESTIMONIALS



Ms. Bouasone Soulitham

Vientiane Branch Manager, Savan Park Special Economic Zone, Lao PDR
Activity: Management of Special Economic Zones Practices in Lancang-Mekong Countries

I did not expect that there is such a platform that gathers representatives from Lancang-Mekong region so I am really happy that I get to join this program. Through this training, we were provided with materials that allowed us to see the broader examples of special economic zone operations in the region and the world. I hope MI will continue to offer such training so that people in the region can come together, brainstorm and create value for our society and for economic development.

Ms. Nguyen Thi Phuong

Purchasing Manager, Trading and Purchasing Department, Ideal Farm Corporation, Vietnam
Activity: Rural E-Commerce Development in the Lancang-Mekong Countries



This training gave me a chance to review my business model. Usually we are very busy to examine what we're doing so this training was a good time for us to review everything. I learned some very good practices from other businesses, and explored potential cooperation also in the future. One thing I also like about MI is your vision and mission. You want us to not only learn from the training but also to share what we learned with the community.



Ms. Dinah Martha Akirapa

Psychological Social Worker, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Uganda
Activity: Gender Equality and Women Empowerment: Sharing Good Practices of Thailand

Coming to Thailand for this training has been a very, very good experience. We have a variety of people sharing experiences, and we also have an opportunity to learn from the experiences of Thailand. The topics have been very rich, and we gained more confidence to advocate for gender equality.

MI CALENDAR

JAN

14-25 Modular Training on Strategic Management to Labor Migration in the GMS

FEB

2nd Modular Training on Green Freight and Logistics Development

12-13 Synthesis and Evaluation Workshop on Modular Training on SEZ Management in Lancang-Mekong Countries

25-01
MAR Regional Training Program on Postharvest Safe Food Handling

MAR

Modular Training on Coordinated Border Management

10-16 Regional Training of Trainers on Food Safety Promotion

25-29 2nd Modular Training on Rural E-commerce Development in Lancang-Mekong Countries



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